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ABSTRACT

In this study, researchers investigated whether school leaders who were members of minority groups draw on specific skills in order to succeed in administrative positions. Interviews with five California school superintendents (three Hispanic and two African American) examined factors for success in their role as superintendent of an urban public school system. Of particular interest were factors within their experience that reach beyond the fundamentals taught in educational administration programs. Success for these administrators, particularly in school systems where the superintendent's role has traditionally been filled by white males, required that they draw on their skills to network aggressively across cultural and racial lines in the face of the remnants of historical oppression. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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1

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African American and Hispanic Superintendents: Factors for Success

by Franklin Campbell-Jones and Robin Avelar-LaSalle

Abstract

In this study the researchers investigate whether school leaders who are members of minority groups, Hispanic and African-American, draw upon specific skills in order to succeed in administrative positions. Through interviews, this study examines five California school superintendents (three Hispanic and two African-American) as they describe factors for success in their role as superintendent in urban public school systems. Of particular interested were factors within their experience that reach beyond the basic fundamentals taught in education administration programs.

Public education is under extreme scrutiny, with parents, community and government officials concerned over many aspects of the current system. Much of the criticism from the public is aimed at educational administration and the lack of cohesive, strong, and able leadership in many schools and districts (Barth, 1991). Carter and Cunningham (1997) view the superintendent as a "lightening rod" (p. 5) for all the difficulties facing the youth in American society. In spite of decreasing budgets through the 1990's and decaying facilities long forgotten on the political battlefields, superintendents are expected to restructure, reengineer,

and redevelop a school system that meets the technological demands of the 21st century. This has resulted in a circumstance akin to a pressure cooker for those occupying the position leading to a mass exodus in the field. As Paul Houston, former superintendent of the Tucson public school system stated, "Most of the superintendents I know – the good ones anyway – are trying to figure out a way to get out." (in Carter and Cunningham, p 7). Under these conditions exceptional leadership is required for success. However, anecdotes from practicing administrators suggest that their credential degree programs only partially prepared them for the realities of present-day educational administration.

In California, shifts in student demographics motivate a change in focus and strategies in educational leadership. The following are demographic data that affect the practice of educational administration in California (ACSA, 1994).

1. California has the largest school enrollment in the nation.
2. Two-thirds of the immigration in the world is to the United States.
3. One-half of the immigration to the United States is California.
4. California is first among the states in the number of foreign-born residents.
5. One of three Latino children and two of four Asian children in the United States live in California.
6. California is the most populated of all of the states; second in African American population; first in Latino and Asian populations.
7. In 1995, students from diverse backgrounds (ethnic minorities) comprised 58.6% of the student population in California (37.9% Hispanic, 8.7%

African American, 8.2% Asian, 2.4% Filipino, 0.9% American Indian/Alaskan, 0.6% Pacific Islander).

In contrast to the profile of increasing minority student populations, the teacher and administrative ranks remain occupied by members of the traditional dominant majority group. In 1993, teachers of diverse ethnic backgrounds comprised 19.4% of the teachers in California (5.4% African American, 4.5% Asian American, 8.7% Hispanic and 0.8% Native American). Membership in the Association of California School Administrators, the largest school professional administrative association in the state, reports the following ethnic and racial composition: (a.) African American--6%, (b) American Indian/Eskimo- .07%, (c.) Asian- 2.2%, (d.) Filipino- .05% Hispanic- 9.5%, (e.) White- 81.5%.

A crucial personnel issue facing schools in the state is who will replace existing administrators. For many administrators in the California public school system, retirement is on the horizon. Reports of the crisis in the teacher shortage are echoed by a similar if not larger crisis in the search for school administrators (Yerkes & Cuaglampne, 1998). Given the current shift in demographics, will many of the new leaders be from historically underrepresented populations in the United States of America? What skills and talents will these new leaders, who are from traditionally underrepresented groups, need to be successful in the current context of public schooling?

This investigation examines skills and talents needed by minority administrators to achieve success in a highly diverse urban setting. Preliminary conversations with current minority and majority administrators suggest that

minority administrators in urban settings may face challenges unlike those of other school leaders. The primary goal of this study is to investigate whether school leaders who happen to be members of minority groups draw upon specific skills in order to succeed in administrative positions. The researchers examine what five California school superintendents (three Hispanic and two African-American) describe as factors leading to success in their role as chief administrative officer of public school systems. Factors that reach beyond the basic fundamentals of becoming an effective administrator were of particular interest in this investigation.

Historical and Theoretical Considerations

The literature on the success of superintendents from minority backgrounds is scarce. In this section, we present the status of three major discussions that have some bearing on successful minority superintendents: (a) leadership and the superintendency, (b) leadership and diversity, and (c) administrative preparation. We conclude by bringing together the three areas as a foundation of this investigation.

Leadership and the Superintendency

A considerable amount of research has concentrated on the job requirements of public school superintendents. In a key example, Cuban (1976) studied the evolution of the skills required of successful superintendents in large urban districts. The first is the view of superintendent as teacher-scholar and

was the early conception of the position. The most important role of the position was to make "good teachers out of poor ones" (p 116). The primary responsibilities included visitations of classrooms, training and inspiring teachers, and providing supplies and appliances to teachers. The second view is that of administrative chief. Under this conceptualization the superintendent has full control and centralized authority of administrative duties, including the hiring and firing of teachers, oversight of school construction, finance, and facilities. The third is that of negotiator-statesman. This conceptualization of the superintendent takes into account the socio-political context of the position. It acknowledges the superintendent's role in working with members of their board of education, community, employee unions, and governmental constituencies.

In an attempt to bring clarity to culpability to the position, the American Association of School Administration and National School Board Association (Carter and Cunningham, p 243) jointly issued their version of the superintendent's responsibilities. They list the following:

- To serve as the school board's chief executive officer and preeminent education adviser in all efforts of the board to fulfill its school system governance role.
- To serve as the primary educational leader for the school system and chief administrative officer of the entire school district's professional support staff, including staff members assigned to provide support service to the board.
- To serve as a catalyst for the school system's administrative leadership team in proposing and implementing policy changes

- To propose and institute a process for long-range strategic planning that will engage the board and the community in positioning the school district for success in ensuing years.
- To interpret the needs of the school system to the board.
- To present policy options along with specific recommendations to the board when circumstances require the board to adopt new policies or review existing policies.
- To develop and inform the board of administrative procedures needed to implement board policy.

Although these frameworks do not address minority superintendents as a group, it does exemplify useful ways to conceptualize leadership characteristics of superintendents. It also argues for legitimizing the concept of moving beyond a description of leadership styles as discrete behaviors and dispositions, to include fundamentally different visions for the role of the superintendent in a school system.

Leadership and Diversity

Gender and ethnicity are two aspects of diversity that are included, to limited degrees, in the literature on leadership and the superintendency. Regarding gender, for instance, the work of Skrla (1998), Blount, (1995), and Brunner (1997) represents the growing body of literature that describes challenges faced by female superintendents, that are different from those that confront their male counterparts. Langford (1993) suggests that successful

female administrators learn to exhibit authority in ways that differ from authoritative behaviors of men. Duncan (1995) asserts that successful female administrators develop the skills necessary for success in the dominant culture while still validating their own identity and self-esteem. Those skills range from ways of interacting and behaving to ways of speaking and dressing.

Gender discussions related to school administration provide an interesting framework from which to consider parallel issues related to ethnicity and leadership. Revere (1987), in a study of Black, female superintendents, found that respondents reported being viewed as 'superwomen," of constantly having to prove themselves, and of trying to outperform the normal expectations of the position. They believed their work must be a much higher quality than that of their peers and that a differential manner of respect is shown African-American female superintendents than that afforded their white peers. Also, the confounding problems of sexism and racism were seen overwhelmingly as the prevalent causes for the fact that so few African-American women occupy the superintendency in the first place.

While the literature on African American administrators is scarce, the study of Hispanics in educational administration is even more limited. Ortiz and Ortiz (1995) in their study of gender and ethnicity relative to Hispanic females is a rare example of how gender and ethnicity interact in the case of Hispanic female superintendents.

It is clear that white males have historically held the position of superintendent of schools. Revere (1987) asserts that the position of

superintendent has been assumed over the years through the "old boy" network and has been handed to white males through preferential treatment. She states, "This practice has led to the number superintendents in the United States being almost exclusively male and white." (p 510).

Scott (1980) noted that African-American superintendents in the United States often were in jobs that were abandoned by White superintendents and were often left with systems that suffered from infrastructure failure and massive budgetary constraints. He further attested that these systems were a part of the urban crisis of that time that continued to perpetuate the cycle of poverty, the merry-go-round of despair and frustration.

What knowledge and skills set would minority superintendents have to acquire in order to deal with he bleak picture painted by Scott as to the reality faced by most African-American superintendents? In the next section, administrative preparation programs are explored in general and the California State University Los Angeles Program in particular.

Administrative Preparation

A study of educational administrative preparation programs found that in the period between 1986 and 1996, 88% of the 50 states revised their requirements for administrative licensure/certification, the resulting programs concentrated on fundamentally the same issues that previous programs emphasized (reported in AASA, fall 1999). The survey found a great deal of consistency between the coursework required by most educational administration

programs, organized around four major issues: (a) business/management (b) curriculum and instruction, (b) organization, and foundations. In California, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, outlines standards for programs in educational administration (EDAD). Those standards closely match the four areas described in the AASA reported study.

Three years ago, CSULA revised its EDAD program to respond to the needs of administrators preparing to work with the unique challenges and opportunities associated with leading school reform in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The geography has a concentration of schools that represent every aspect of diversity possible in a large, mostly urban, public educational setting. In response, the EDAD program is designed around the CTC standards, but adds several key themes, that strand throughout the program. These themes include issues of equity, critical pedagogy, multiple perspectives, and the will to serve the community.

One issue that has recently become apparent is the need to respond not only to the needs of the schools served by administrators that we prepare, but also the needs of the administrative candidates. Of late, an increasing number of new and aspiring administrators attending CSULA are minority and primarily Hispanic. The EDAD program, however, does not explicitly address issues that minority administrators tend to face on the job that are different from those issues that challenge all administrators. This study attempts to contribute to an understanding of those issues unique to minority administrators so that college

and university EDAD preparation programs can create programs that can lead to more success for minority candidates.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

In this investigation five minority superintendents were interviewed, three Hispanic and two African-American. The superintendents all worked in California, in urban or suburban districts. The ages of the superintendents ranged from their early forties to late fifties. They all had no less than 16 years of experience in administration, but ranged in years as superintendent from 1 year to 25 years. The superintendents were selected for participation because they had strong professional reputations as successful superintendents and they happened to be Hispanic or African-American. Each superintendent was contacted in advance by telephone and informed as to the nature of the study. All volunteered to participate in the study.

Instrument

An interview protocol was developed to examine the superintendents' responses to key questions about their perceptions about factors associated with their success. The questions were open-ended, with the intent to focus the participants' on defined discussion areas. Although the questions were presented as a means of establishing and guiding the interview, it was the intent

of the researchers to allow each participant to offer perspectives they viewed as important on the topic. The guiding questions were:

- We assume there is a skill set required for African American/Hispanics to be successful as the district's CEO. Please reflect on this assumption
- Do you believe others perceive you any particular way in your world of work? Please explain
- What are the conditions for your achievement and success in your position?
- What were the key points in your career that influenced the way you think today about your position?

Data Collection and Analysis

Two interviews took place face-to-face and three were conducted by telephone. Each was recorded electronically or manually. Field notes were also used to further capture information revealed in the interview sessions. The interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes. The tapes and notes were transcribed and the major themes of each interview were identified. Finally, the emerging themes were compared across interviews to identify overlapping concepts.

Results

This section presents themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data. Supporting data in the form of quotes taken from the participants

are also presented. The themes fall into two major categories: (a) Necessary Conditions for Success, and (b) Barriers to Success. The section is concluded with a discussion of what the superintendents view as necessary skills for success at their position.

Necessary Conditions for Success

Awareness of Context

All five superintendents believed that minority administrators must master the same knowledge set that all administrators are expected to know. However, in various forms, each described the additional need to be astute about social class issues that are not always emphasized in administrative preparation programs. For example one participant spoke of what it was required to master the historical inertia of not being from a privileged class and being the schools chief executive officer.

> Race does matter. If you lose the contexts of where you live, you are more apt to fail. The context in which we live is based on race, prejudice, and stereotyping. Those are real! You have to remember that, not as a negative and not to be debilitated, but it is critical to know that the reason that some people assume that they have rights to where you are. It is not personal. But it is the context; I call it the air your breathe. It is just there. As a result you have to always be on guard. As soon as you stop paying attention to it, that's when you are the most vulnerable. It is a burden that most non-Hispanics and non African-Americans do not have to attend.

They described a circumstance where many minority administrators working in urban areas not only work with low-income communities, but at one time, were likely to be members of such a community. This dynamic provides minority administrators with an opportunity to offer insights about the educational process for all students in a way that others may miss. One participant stated:

> A minority is expected to know more than the norm. We are expected to know how to mobilize ethnic communities and have excellent resource skills to move an agenda. But we have to do it in a non-threatening way, to be both sides. It is an unwritten expectation. Minorities bring skills rooted in different experiences and can connect better and influence more.

As a result, participants spoke of a moral imperative to become well versed in the academic and practical issues related to social class implications for education and to use their unique insight to be proactive in response. One offered the following:

> We must remember to respect what we know. Our insights are based on experience. They are right! Others may not be able to perceive what we do. It is our obligation to speak up. Often, we risk being ostracized. That is our responsibility. We must have fortitude not to run. We must learn resiliency.

There was a feeling among the superintendents that it was important for them to stay grounded in their historical roots as they went about their work. Another stated:

> Never forget who you are and where you came from while moving through the administrative chairs. I think part of my value set, just like other minorities who have come before me, is that I am here for a reason. One of those reasons is to leave the world a better place.

Engagement of *Will*

The participants felt that a necessary condition for success was for them to forcible engage their *will* into the work. Engagement of the will was expressed in many ways. Examples include 1.) A willingness to work harder than everyone else, 2). A willingness to listen and learn from the counsel of others who have "come before" and, 3.) A willingness to command the English language better

than the rest. However, the undercurrent for all of these reasons for forcible engaging the will is that they now occupied positions that were not intended for them. As a result, they had to always do "better than the rest." A participant offered the following:

> People often say, 'You are so articulate!' Why are they surprised? We must develop our language. We must prepare ourselves more than everyone else. Read! Stay current! We can't afford to not be better, because we are not excused.

Another offered the following:

> The perception for some is that you didn't get the job based on qualifications. So therefore, you have to prove yourself. When I see other people get jobs, other white people, that assumption to prove themselves is not necessarily there. There is a difference as soon as you walk in the door.

Still another stated:

> Nobody ask the question, 'Do you think Michael Jordan had an affirmative action appointment to the Bulls?' It's very clear. But often I think that we have to do things just a little bit better than the average person, because of the lingering skepticism that is out there. You have to be better than others in doing the same job. People are going to doubt you. People are going to think you are not prepared. People are going think you are not diligent. People are going to think you are not thorough in your work. You need, in every opportunity, to prove that you are effective in what you do.

The exercise of *will* was seen as the venue for staying power in the position that moved beyond the shadows of affirmative action, perceived placement by quotas.

Engagement of the *will* also means using the position to assist others in the public school systems who do not have the knowledge or skill to engage in difficult conversations about inequalities of academic achievement for minority

students. Often this requires the superintendent to be conscious of the unconscious that is present in the hearts and minds of employees and make assumptions about students a public conversation. One participant stated:

> You hear a word. You hear interaction. People bring it. You have to make the conversation public, which I have done. The conversation about how kids are doing is put on the table. How are our African-American kids doing? How are our Hispanic kids doing? They're not doing very well? Why not? What do you think is happening to them in our system? When you put it on the table, the ability to dialogue opens up the system. People are not comfortable

Superintendents suggest that the continued success of forcible use of the *will*, particularly as it relates to issues that have historically plagued minority students, requires the use of statesmanship, particularly in the understanding of the multiple agendas of those in power.

> Sometimes you may have a goal yourself. But if you're in a situation where that's not a top priority of the leadership of where you are, in this case the board, then you have to decide how best to work towards that goal and how hard to push in that direction. You can push too hard and you are out of there.

Developing Networks

The superintendents expressed a need to not only join existing networks for all administrators, but to join and if necessary create networks that focused upon their special needs as minorities who now occupy the non traditional role as chief CEO of a public school system. As a result, to be successful they felt it necessary to participate in mentoring and coaching relationships from others who understand their uniqueness regardless of ethnic or racial identity. As one

participant stated, "We depend on mentoring from others. We are not born into a network like this. We must cultivate one."

Cultivating a network consists of being a fully participating member of the dominant network of professional association such as the Association of California School administrators. The following testimony is offered:

> Over the past years I have been involved with the Association of California School Administrators. In the context of that I've chaired their urban education committee. I have helped that organization address diversity concerns as an organization and of course that's in the past now.

However, within the context of the dominant groups associations some stated that networks were formed that included only African-American or Hispanic.

> If you are going to a meeting with 700 superintendents and only 14 are African-American, sometimes all of us will stand in the hallway and talk. Folk will come up and make little remarks, especially if they know one of us and say, 'What's this some sort of Black conference or something?' We all laugh and say, 'Yeah' and keep on talking.

Barriers to Success

The superintendents identified several factors that posed the greatest challenges to minority administrators. Each related that racial prejudice is a constant reality and that preconceptions about their abilities, leadership, effectiveness, or qualifications were ever present by members of the organizations and the community at large. One superintendent spoke of the barrier of white privilege and the need to develop confidence through inner strength.

> You have to come up with ways of manifesting your own confidence because of the privilege that is used against you and because of the air that you breathe as a minority. When you took your first breath as a baby, you didn't breathe in the air of privilege.

Barriers were often seen as built into the system in subtle ways that are designed to weed out and eliminate people of color as they worked towards higher administrative positions. These barriers manifest themselves as institutionalized mechanisms that are built into the organization machinery to keep minorities out of the mainstream of administration. One superintendent reflect on the following

> I have seen well qualified, dedicated, African-American administrators, placed in isolation based on racial politics. It's usually mailed in some other package: 'doesn't get along with the community, disorganized, doesn't follow through.' In some cases they simply make it known that, 'We don't want him.'

Perhaps the greatest barrier to overcome was the temptation to see oneself as the victim of all of the ills of society and therefore not worthy of the position of superintendent. Many spoke of a continuous inner dialogue that served to shape and reshape their image as one who is worthy of the role even though they occupy the position and are well qualified to do so. As one superintendent stated, "We must remember that we are added value and not less." Several described an "inner tape" that reminded them that they have every right of hold the position as superintendent or "the boss." Another participant stated that it was necessary to "inject yourself with an antidote against self victimization."

> I called my mom when she was sick and in bed. I told her I was coming over to visit. She said, 'Are you going to get in trouble taking

> time off your job?' I said, 'Mom, I'm the boss!' She said, 'Oh yeah, I guess you are."

Skill Set

The superintendents described several skills that they had to develop in order to be successful. Such expertise, they felt, were not naturally acquired as part of their academic preparation.

1. To be strong, but not threatening. Each expressed using the vested authority of their positions with focus and in a manner that was non- threatening and inclusive. A major success factor was to make sure that everyone in the organization was provided the opportunity to be a member of a "winning" team. As stated by one participant, "This is not just textbook stuff, but common sense. Some people lose support by just focusing on themselves."
2. To work with *all* types of people, even those who display racism or prejudice. Establishing coalitions that reached beyond ethnic walls was seen as critical to success. In fact, working with only one ethnicity and omitting others was characterized as a fatal mistake. "You can't make the fatal mistake of only working with people of your own ethnicity," stated one participant. "Sometimes that power base goes away, particularly if you don't do what they want. As superintendent, you are the whole system. You must work beyond your racial identity."
3. To communicate within the rule structure of the dominant culture, including behavioral and linguistic characteristics. They expressed the importance of strong communication skills. Some indicated how extra careful they were in

making sure all documents from their office received additional attention for grammatical and linguistic continuity.

4. To advocate for issues of integrity that only *you* can see, without alienating people. Some express that it was important to use the position of superintendent as a lever to open up dialogue so that voices not typically heard can rise to the surface.

Conclusion

African-American and Hispanic superintendents interviewed in this study suggest that it is necessary they be cognizance of factors that reach far beyond the curriculum of traditional education administration preparation programs. Success as a school administrator, in particular as the chief executive officer of a school system where the roles has been traditionally held by white males, requires they draw upon their skills to aggressively network cross cultural and racial lines in the face of the residuals of the historical oppression. Success is laced with a tireless work ethic that places these individuals in the category of superhuman. Cuban, in describing the complexity of the superintendent's position states:

> A superintendent, then, is not likely to be a man for all seasons. ...The times, the local political context and dominant conception of leadership may well determine whether a school man can do an effective job or not. There are fall, summer, spring, and winter superintendents – but none for all seasons. (p. 170)

However, in the case of these five individuals, their very existence required they be for all season and beyond. Examination of their worthiness to

hold the position was placed upon them in general by all members of the organization at all times. A failure at any task was perceived as proof positive that the wrong person was selected for the job. Consequently, each made it their practice to do the job, twice as well!

"The Hispanic leader", states Ernest Flores, "has an extra cross to bear, however small it may be" (1981:36). As students prepare to be educational leaders, they need to know the fundamentals of school administration as well as the theoretical foundations for organizational leadership. However, for the minority candidates, particularly those who are Hispanic or African-American, care should be given by instructors to assist them in understanding the historical inertia of oppression in this society and the effects this can have on their effectiveness and career advancement. This includes an awareness of the external barriers of white privilege as well as the internal forces of self-doubt.

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